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THE THEORY OF HUNGARIAN MUSIC

By EDWARD KILENYI

IN connection with the Irish Rebellion of 1916 Shaw said that a rebellion every couple of weeks would be a good thing for any country. Similarly one might say that in the realm of art a bomb exploded every now and then under complacently accepted theories has a generally salutary effect—if only as a stimulant. One would not easily picture a university professor as a bomb-thrower, nor does the scholarly, painstaking method of Dr. Molnár Géza, Professor of Music at the Hungarian Royal State University, precisely suggest explosiveness. Nevertheless in his recent learned work on the theory of Hungarian music Dr. Molnár blows many popular notions on the subject as violently to smithereens as if he were one of our most rampant iconoclasts.

This is all the more refreshing, because we have never before had a really authentic work on the nature and origin of Hungarian music. The old Hungarian theoreticians contented themselves with pointing out what they considered good Hungarian music or bad Hungarian music, without venturing far into the reasons for their faith. Some of them decided that Hungarian music took its forms and rhythms from Hungarian prosody; others, among them Liszt, tried to identify Hungarian music with gypsy music. The latter theory has been generally accepted; perhaps because it is plausible and picturesque.

But Dr. Molnár takes these notions and throws them out of the window. To begin with, he scouts the identity of gypsy and Hungarian music. All the national characteristics of the latter, he points out, were established long before the gypsies immigrated into Hungary. That the gypsy is not possessed of creative talent was thoroughly proved in a discussion before the Folk-lore Congress in London in 1891. Gypsies have always learned the music of the countries in which they have sojourned. Hence there are various kinds of gypsy music, differing according to the countries in which these wandering people have dwelt. Indeed, for the same reason, gypsy music is different in different parts of Hungary. However, the gypsies have done a great service to Hungarian music by playing from generation to generation, and so preserving, the music created by the Hungarian people themselves.

Dr. Molnár is no more friendly to the favorite theory that Hungarian music took its typical rhythms from Hungarian poetry. In this he is supported by Négyessy László, who, in his book "A magyar vers" (1887) points out that the rhythms in poetry and music are not always identical. The difference becomes obvious when one compares Hungarian prosodic formulas with Hungarian musical phrases. The most characteristic Hungarian music, in fact, consists of phrases to which no prosodic parallel can be found in Hungarian poetry of the past.

Hungarian prosody actually took its forms from the classical Greek and Latin. For example, in the poetry of the Hungarian Erdőssy Silvester János (1504–1560) we find the familiar hexameters and pentameters of the Roman poets. Similarly, Dr. Molnár says, the *Hungarian music of the 16th century borrowed its forms from the prevailing fashion, in other words from contemporary sacred music and from the contrapuntists*. And these forms, he says, contain the distinctive characteristics which we have been accustomed to associate with Hungarian music. One is disposed to wonder just why the Hungarian national genius appropriated and absorbed these characteristics. Dr. Molnár attributes the fact to political, social and linguistic conditions. But although he does not pretend to be positive about the cause of this fact he adduces quite positive and convincing proofs of the fact itself.

The relation between the Hungarian scale and the old church modes can be seen clearly from an analysis of Hungarian songs. The Dorian scale, for instance, with a major sixth and a minor seventh, is to be found in the following song:



The song begins with the fourth scale step of the Dorian scale. The Hypoæolian scale is to be found in the following song, often sung to-day:



In this notation of Horváth Ádám the last four bars modulate into "d" minor. But it is likely that in olden times also the last four bars were sung in the original Hypoæolian mode. At any rate, the characteristic minor sevenths in the Dorian, Hypophrygian, and Hypoæolian scales are very frequent in Hungarian music, even when they cannot be found as often as the augmented fourths. The use of these different scales in Hungarian music marks another similarity between Hungarian music and the contrapuntal writing of Bach and Händel. In Hungarian melodies the harmonic minor scale is often combined with the melodic minor, and in minor scales the sixth and seventh scale-steps sometimes are raised, sometimes not (without cross relation, of course) as in the music of Bach and Händel. This use may be the origin of the mixtures of intervals of the minor scale with those of the major. Harmonies or chords that will again prove the relation of Hungarian music with the music of the masters just mentioned may be seen in the frequent use of the augmented sixth chords in both. The augmented sixth and augmented \sharp chords (French sixth chords) are more frequent in Bach's music than in the works of the later classic masters.

The subject of national melody is indeed a much misunderstood one. A melody alone can hardly express national character. For example, we meet with the same melody from three different nations:



Each of these melodies is based on the Ionian tetrachord:



But there are nationally characteristic ways of handling a melody, which reveal themselves to careful examination. A minute analysis of Hungarian melodic characteristics was made by Szénfy Gustáv (in the *Zenészeti lapok* 1862, p. 298. and 1863,

p. 10). He came to the conclusion that Hungarian melodies tend to proceed in leaps and that melodies proceeding diatonically have a tendency to descend. Szénfy made the fundamental mistake of examining melodies in the limit of one single measure, ignoring measures where the melodies were of sixteenth or thirty-second notes. Dr. Molnár, on the other hand, examined whole phrases instead of single measures. He considered not only the length of the phrases but also the accents of the notes; he tried to put every phrase harmonically into a major or minor triad. In his researches he found interesting examples that again and again justify his statements concerning the origin of Hungarian music. Here is one of his most convincing examples, an old church song (from the collection of Szelepcsényi)



This song is sung by the Hungarian people in the following way:



The melodic embellishments so common in Hungarian music became characteristic melodic motives through frequent use. An analysis of old tunes shows clearly that melodic embellishments are but actual transcriptions or embellishments of single long tones. These coloratura-like ornaments lend themselves to a typical Hungarian effect. Another is obtained through *portamento* (gradual fine chromatic sliding from one tone to another), much favored in Hungarian music. A lot depends upon the proper playing of such “embellishments.” In general, embellishments should not be played dynamically weaker than the figure to which they belong. It is the *shortness* of the notes that is important. Here are in detail the qualities of embellishments as they appear, in Hungarian music: 1) The inverted mordent (Vorschlag) is accented. Sometimes an embellishment has another embellishment. For instance:



Here the short grace notes are not heavy. 2) The leaplike grace note is not heavy. 3) The “Pralltrill” and mordent are somewhat

heavy, but dynamically not strong. 4) The following mordent is not strong:

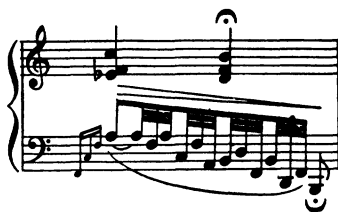


5) The afternote (Nachschlag) has some accent. The following is not Hungarian:



6) Embellishments consisting of more tones are sometimes crescendo, sometimes diminuendo, according to the dynamic quality of the melody itself.

The following is characteristic:



Here the arpeggio chord (triad) is the embellishment.

This is also very characteristic:



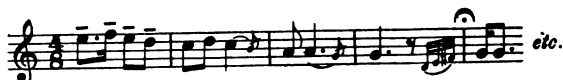
Embellishments are often found before the motive:



Sometimes they are sforzato:



An embellishment sometimes does not appear earlier than in the fourth bar, and is followed by the opening of a new phrase and a fermata:



An embellishment may lead to a new key:



Before the staccato the leaplike "Vorschlag" is much used:



An embellishment is used before a dotted note as follows:

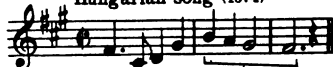


Longer embellishments and trills—not runs—are crescendo. The following examples show the relation between embellished Hungarian melodies and the music of Bach and Händel:

Bach: Gigue



Hungarian song (1674)



Bach: Bourree



Rákóczy Ferencz' Prayer



Of the numerous harmonic characteristics in Hungarian music the following are the most frequent. The raised tonic as the leading tone of the new key:



The minor seventh or the lowered leading tone used immediately after a major key gives a good Hungarian effect. The diminished seventh chord (another product of the polyphonic period) was

often used with good Hungarian effect by Liszt. Its Hungarian character, however, is lost if it does not modulate into a new key.

"What is classified as Hungarian harmony, according to the standard laws of harmony, is real dissonance," remarks Dr. Molnár, for *good* Hungarian harmonies may be obtained through 1) passing tones, 2) suspensions, 3) anticipations, 4) changing tones, 5) and organ points. These "dissonances" give "good" Hungarian harmonies, especially if they are on accented beats, and they can be regulated also dynamically. It is not advisable, however, to use strong dissonances excessively." We may illustrate by the following examples. Here is the Hungarian scale:



The most characteristic tone is the augmented fourth, which, if used as an unaccented passing tone, will be of no effect:



The effect is more Hungarian if the augmented fourth is accented:



In using organ points, too, the effect is stronger on accented than on unaccented beats. Of especial importance in Hungarian harmony are those non-harmonic (passing) tones at the end of a phrase, that modulate into another key. Such tones are unaccented beginnings of the motives or phrases beginning over the next bar line:



Such use of unaccented notes for modulating is older in Hungarian music than in music of the great masters. Before

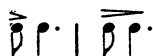
Schumann and Brahms it was a prevailing principle of modulation that the changes of harmonies were more effective on accented beats than on unaccented beats.

The augmented fourth, as we can see from Tinódy's songs (1554), is used in Hungarian music as 1) a tone that leads over to the key of the dominant, 2) a tone that, when going to the key of the parallel minor, becomes the (major) third of the subdominant or the raised sixth scale-step of the ascending melodic minor scale, 3) as the leading tone of the minor scale beginning with the dominant. Thus:



The dynamics and accents in rhythm, pregnant with new colors and emotions, lent a richness and power to the Hungarian music of the 16th and 17th centuries which modern Hungarian composers, by neglecting these characteristics, have failed to obtain. This neglect resulted from the teaching of the old academic theoreticians, who utterly ignored these values.

The question naturally arises as to what is the minimum rhythmic figure that we can recognise as characteristically racial. A rhythmic figure may be so short that, no matter how commonly it is used, it does not of itself contain any particular racial or national flavor. For example, the most characteristic Hungarian rhythmic motive



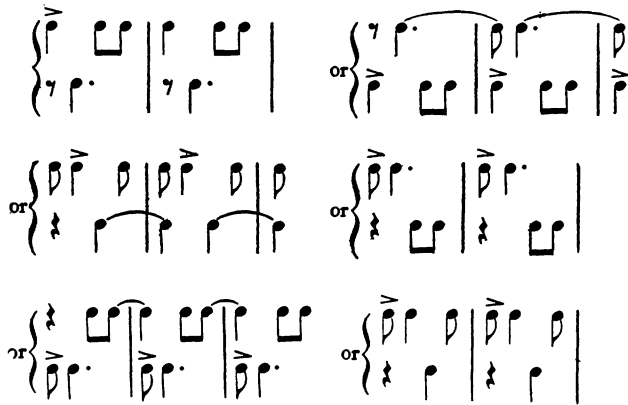
is often found in Irish, Bohemian and Neapolitan folk-songs, as well as in the works of Weber, Mendelssohn, and Beethoven. A longer rhythmic motive—at least a whole measure in length—may be more strongly indicative of national character, though even one of the most characteristic Hungarian motives



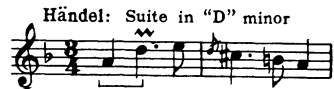
can be found in the "Swanee River"; proving that while a motive standing alone may easily be recognizable as purely Hungarian, it takes its color from its context. The true quality of a Hungarian motive also depends on whether it is properly played. A motive of Hungarian rhythm should be written down exactly as it is to be played, and the performer should not be allowed to take liberties with it. This is a serious warning, because Hungarian music has already the bad reputation of not following the regular laws concerning tempo, rhythm, and accents. The habitually false and arbitrary rendering of Hungarian music made an early æsthetician (Verseghy Ferencz, 1791) assert that he "did not like music where there were no regular bars and no regular rhythms played in strict time, or where they were made irregular by willful and capricious performances."

To find true Hungarian rhythmic formulas, scholars should not restrict themselves to examining them only from bar-line to bar-line, as the old Hungarian academicians did, because a characteristic motive may begin and end in the middle of a bar, and because in a longer phrase or period the national character is intensified.

It is interesting to note the effect of counterpoint on the development of Hungarian rhythm. Dr. Molnár shows us very clearly that the characteristic short motive $\text{♩} \text{♩}'$, already mentioned—which according to Dr. Riemann's erroneous statement is but a mere repetition of notes (repercussio)—*originated from a striving for contrapuntal variety in rhythm and from the complementary nature of the two contrapuntal parts.* The following polyrhythms bear out this contention:



Further proof is contained in the different dances of the same period, where we find the rhythm of an accented short note followed by an unaccented long note:



Especially in the Sarabande we find frequently this same characteristic Hungarian motive. Furthermore, it may be remarked that Passacaglias and Sarabandes are mostly in minor keys, just as Hungarian music shows a strong preference for minor keys. The slow tempo of the same dances and their four or eight bar themes also became assimilated with Hungarian music. While in the Loure, Gigue, and Gaillarde the accented beat is dotted, its

identity with the Hungarian short motive is quite clear. The fundamental rhythm of the Loure



shows this dotted accented beat just as we find it in the up-beats in the following examples from Bach's Fifth French Suite:

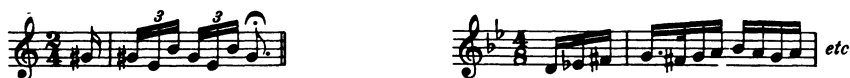


The assertion that this characteristic short motive originated in the polyphonic period is sufficiently proved by the total absence of it from music previous to that time. Hence we do not find this motive in the following dance by Horváth Ádám (1813) in which he tried to imitate the music of the time of Hunyady János (1387 (?)–1456).



The same formula is missing also from a song of Tinódy Sebestyén. (1510 (?)–1577). This characteristic short motive was at first simply borrowed by the Hungarians; then it became assimilated and grew more and more melodious, rhythmically sharper, and altogether more individual.

It is a generally accepted rule that Hungarian music should not have an unaccented beginning, because in the Hungarian language the accent falls on the first syllable. Now, to apply this "rule," that is, to forbid rhythmic formulas with unaccented beginnings, would indeed deprive Hungarian music of rich means. The falseness of this rule was proved through the laws of the Hungarian language by Arany László, (1844–1895 (?)) one of the best Hungarian scholars and poets. The unaccented beginning (up-beat) is found in the following old Hungarian "Verbunkos" by Czinka Panna (1735).



Erkel, too, employed up-beats in his opera "Hunyady László":



The accented beginning is not a tradition; and even if it were, why should Hungarians stick to it if almost every nation has modified and changed its national dances?

Here we should distinguish the unaccented up-beat from the unaccented embellishment, which also can be written in a separate measure:



A Passamezzo Ongaro from the 16th century also begins with an up-beat:



This Passamezzo, by the way, may upset the theory that old Hungarian music consisted chiefly of music in slow time. That this theory is without substance can be proven from the existence of numerous "saltarellos" and from the fact that in the old mensural music ("mezzo") was identical with "alla breve." Consequently "passo a mezzo" must have been a dance of a lively tempo. A musical phrase that does not end at the last beat of the bar, suggests an up-beat. Inasmuch as in Hungarian music the cæsura often falls after the second or the third tone of the bar, the unaccented beginning is obviously not against its true nature.

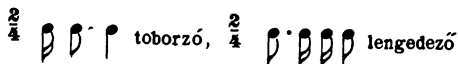
In $\frac{4}{8}$ or in $\frac{2}{4}$ time we generally meet with the following formulas:



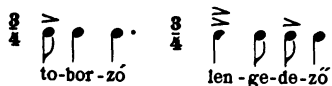
Examples a) and d) are rarely found in old Greek poetry; c) was not used by the Romans either; b) and c) can be found in the hexameter; in Bach's time a) and b) were used oftenest. Hungarian music, therefore, where the cæsura falls after the second and third tone of the bar, has some relation to the music of the time of Bach. So, argues Dr. Molnár, *the manner of accenting is a heritage from Bach's time*. One is all the more inclined to this conclusion by the fact that Hungarian music even to-day has a strong tendency toward $\frac{4}{4}$ and $\frac{4}{8}$ measures.

Older Hungarian theoreticians also argued wrongly against uneven measures. Neither is this "rule" in accordance with the

nature of the Hungarian language. For example, the following formulas and words:



could be set to good Hungarian music in $\frac{3}{4}$ time with accents as indicated:



The argument of the old theoreticians was very bad indeed, because uneven verse forms were used in the early epic poetry of the 14th century. Furthermore, it stood in the way of the natural evolution of Hungarian national music. The following examples will show convincingly how uneven bars could be used in Hungarian music:

To this even measure $\frac{2}{4}$ | ♯ | ♯ | ♯ |

this $\frac{3}{4}$ | ♯ | ♯ | ♯ | stands nearer than this $\frac{3}{4}$ |

♯ | ♯ | ♯ | because it brings out more the Hungarian shortness: therefore it could be used in spite of its being an uneven time. The formula | ♯ | ♯ | could easily be interpreted as

" except in case the shorter note is a harmonic resolution of the longer note as a dissonance. The following formula would be adaptable to Hungarian

music, because the dynamic strength falls on the short note. To this formula the following is related:



It is of interest to examine syncopated rhythm from the standpoint of Hungarian music:



Here the unaccented beginning changes the dynamics of the formula through the tie. The accent of the motive therefore is shifted:



Such changing of accent or dynamics is not infrequently found in racial music. The most characteristic Hungarian rhythm, too,

$\overset{\sim}{\text{♩}} \text{♩} \cdot$ originates from $\frac{3}{4}$:

Dynamically: $\text{♩} \overset{<}{\text{♩}} \overset{>}{\text{♩}} \mid \text{♩} \mid \text{♩} \mid \text{♩} \mid$

Accented: $\overset{\sim}{\text{♩}} \text{♩} \overset{\sim}{\text{♩}} \mid \text{♩} \mid \text{♩} \mid \text{♩} \mid$

Contracting these figures into $\overset{\sim}{\text{♩}} \mid \text{♩} \overset{\sim}{\text{♩}}$ and $\overset{\sim}{\text{♩}} \overset{\sim}{\text{♩}}$ we get the

Hungarian national pattern. The same motive, however, can be deduced from a four-tone figure contracted in the following way:



If the figure $\text{♩} \text{♩} \cdot$ was not created by the Hungarian spirit, then it was accepted by it, because it fitted exactly the Hungarian language and speech. The fact that Hungarians accent the first syllable, even if it is short, and the fact that in the Hungarian language the second syllable is mostly long, has made this musical motive peculiarly acceptable to Hungarian poetry and speech.

In old Hungarian music, songs in $\frac{3}{4}$ time are not rare, as we see from the following (an example from the collection of Horváth Ádám, 1813) where the $\frac{3}{4}$ time is interchanged with $\frac{2}{4}$:



and from



comes:



Thus the Hungarian composer may attain a fine effect by making one part play while the other is resting, or by sustaining a tone.

Old Hungarian theoreticians were almost ludicrously stubborn. There were old Hungarian sacred songs in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, as we see from the following example:



(from a collection by Tárkányi, Eger, 1855). Yet, though the theoreticians admitted that these songs represented good Hungarian music, they claimed that the songs were written down wrongly. Mosonyi Mihály, one of the best old Hungarian theoreticians, while admitting the Hungarian quality of the song quoted above, still insisted that it should be written down as follows:



But why did he want to put the tune in $\frac{2}{4}$ time if its Hungarian quality was clear in $\frac{3}{4}$ time?

Some of these hide-bound musicians took strange liberties in following their arbitrary rule. For example, a song printed in $\frac{3}{4}$ time in a collection by Bozóky Mihály in 1797, was reprinted in $\frac{4}{4}$ time in the collection of Kovács Márk in 1842. That the Hungarian people themselves had a preference for $\frac{3}{4}$ time is evidenced by the fact that many old Latin songs in $\frac{4}{4}$ time were taken over by the Hungarian people, changed into $\frac{3}{4}$ time in Hungarian rhythm and set to Hungarian texts: (for instance, a Stabat Mater text from the 8th century).



If the Hungarian people transformed songs from $\frac{4}{4}$ into $\frac{3}{4}$ time, why should theoreticians object to it?

To find rich varieties of true Hungarian rhythms, composers are advised to follow the nature of Hungarian declamation (long, short, accented, unaccented syllables) as it may be found in the works of the best Hungarian poets. These rhythms may also be used in pure instrumental music.

The prevalence of the fermata, too, serves to show that Hungarian music has more in common with old church music than with gypsy music, because the free rhythmical prolonging at the ends of the phrases in old sacred chorals—a habit that probably was exaggerated later by church-singers and organists—is identical with the fermatas at the ends of the phrases in Hungarian folk-songs.

The transcriptions of $\frac{3}{4}$ songs into $\frac{4}{4}$ may suggest other arbitrary transcriptions and there is little doubt that adulterated Hungarian theory was due to the false noting down of early Hungarian music. The habit of noting down Hungarian music with more precision is one that might be cultivated with advantage by Hungarian musicians even of to-day. For instance, we have a song by a contemporary Hungarian, Kún László, who defines the length of a fermata as follows:



Figures of 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 notes in triplets, quintolas, sextolas, etc., and inverted mordents, prallers, turns, etc., or runs of 9–11 tones as scales, are of genuine Hungarian character, as we see from the music of the 18th century. Yet in Hungarian vocal music, for various reasons, the coloratura was used infrequently, if at all.

Hungarian national music always prefers legato, tenuto, portamento, to staccato. The Scherzo and Capriccio, which are characterized by staccato, are not common in old Hungarian music, because early Hungarian music with but few exceptions is of an emotional and serious character. Hungarian music, therefore, does not on the whole contain motives of repeated equal staccato notes. However, a few staccato notes can be found in the works of different composers and in the original of the old Rákóczy-song motive:



Examining the effects of rests in Hungarian music, we find that the rest can stand on both heavy and light beats, and on the strongest or the weakest point of a dynamic formula. Furthermore, a longer rest standing after a short note is Hungarian in character. Either of the following figures is good:



In trying to create Hungarian effect the composer should not forget that a rest falling into a diminuendo has not the effect of a rest at all; it gives rather the impression of a prolongation of the previous note. Making a pause simply in the place of a dot is not Hungarian. Motives, containing rests that suggest syncopated effects, are Hungarian. For instance,




is good because it suggests




This, too, is good Hungarian:



There are more motives beginning with rests in Hungarian music than in the music of other nations. A rest that falls on an accented (heavy) beat or on a dynamic climax of a figure is related to Beethoven's sudden piano effect, where we get a "piano" in the place of the expected "forte." But this, too, originated in

Bach's time. For then, instead of the following  this was

used:  ; that is, the heavy beat was made soft and the light

beat strong. This method became assimilated in Hungarian music.

A short comparative study of some characteristics of other nations will confirm more clearly the essentials that have been already discussed. For instance, the fact that even the most characteristic Hungarian motive could lose its national character

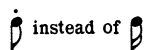
in a phrase that is not Hungarian will be seen from the following Slavonic song:



This phrase, with its characteristic Hungarian motive (a heavy short note followed by a light long one) is not Hungarian. In every bar there is a contraction. The longest note in the first bar is a dotted eighth note, in the second bar a quarter note, in the third a dotted quarter note, in the fourth a half note. Such grouping of notes is entirely absent from Hungarian music. An interesting instance is the following well-known Scotch song:



At first sight it looks as if this song had some relation to Hungarian music. The first bar has the two Hungarian formulas, but these two formulas are in $\frac{4}{4}$ measure, and so the second formula is not as strong as the first. Contracting such $\frac{2}{4}$ or $\frac{4}{8}$ formulas into one measure does not give Hungarian effect. The first part of the second bar is Hungarian, but an English musician, singer, or conductor would not render a sixteenth note as short as a Hungarian would. An English musician would play the sixteenth note as



It may be observed that motives of genuine Hungarian character are found more often in the music of England and America than in the music of any other nation. This may be explained by the fact that English music developed more slowly than the music of other nations, and, like Hungarian music, preserved rhythmic formulas from the age of counterpoint. The two last phrases of the following melody by Horváth Ádám show that he anticipated by a hundred years the popular tunes of Sullivan, Jones, and others.



Here the rhythms of the "Mikado" are easily recognisable. Indeed, it strongly supports the conclusion that *both nations drew from the same phraseology—the phraseology of Bach and Händel*. Just as in this example, so also in Irish, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Russian, Italian, Roumanian, and Polish folk-songs it is evident that the motives assume different colours in different contexts. But national and racial elements are subject to change through centuries, and therefore says Dr. Molnár:

I would not dare force the Hungarian composer to use but a few formulas, nor stop him from using others. What I said concerning true Hungarian national quality is not to be considered as laws that should stand forever. I only wanted to show the musical practice of the last four hundred years. If somebody is able ingeniously and appropriately to fit in something new, unusual, even of strange sound, he should not hesitate to do so. . . . But not even a genius of originality could overthrow the healthy traditions of Hungarian music. On the contrary! A new and original individuality will become great only through being able to develop the musical phraseology of the past into a new musical idiom.

I cannot conclude this essay better than by quoting the concluding paragraph of Dr. Molnár's remarkable work:

As we see, the relation between Hungarian music and the classical period of about 150 years ago can be found in small as well as in great characteristics. *This classical period*—though the climax of the old polyphony had ceased to be in existence—*is the source of Hungarian musical culture*. In Bach's works are to be found all the harmonic and rhythmic richness, all the simple, intricate, naïve and bold harmonies. Whatever is in existence has come through that period. Hungarians, like all other European nations, drew from this source and through their original creative talents sprung up a national musical *genre*. After Bach came the time of harmony, the time of tonality. Here Hungarians missed much. The healthy fundamentals of Hungarian music remained whole, but the work of finishing its development remained undone. But if my readers have listened attentively to what I have said and have not depreciated the importance of *the relation of Hungarian music to the musical principles of Bach and Händel*, then they, too, will clearly see along what path Hungarian music should be further developed.